DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 394 EA 031 600

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TITLE Class Size: An Amendment Reflecting Further Research on State Policies.
PUB DATE 2000-02-29
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *At Risk Persons; *Class Size; Educational Change; Elementary Education; Ethnic Groups; Financial Support; Low Income Groups; *Minority Groups; *Policy Formation; Public Schools; State Action; *State Departments of Education; Teacher Student Ratio

ABSTRACT

This report, by reviewing the contents of specific state statutes and regulations, extends the discussion of actions by state legislatures and education agencies to reduce class size. Data are drawn from primary sources and from email or telephone interviews with state department of education officials. Following the design used in the original "Class Size" paper by the same authors, class size variability along three major dimensions is highlighted: (1) the specific class size targeted; (2) the extent to which class-size policies are limited to specific groups of children; and (3) the extent to which class-size reduction is driven by funding incentives or regulatory mandates. The study is organized into two sections: the three basic dimensions of class-size policy are reviewed, and two class-size policymaking periods are compared and contrasted. The first concerns several state-level actions associated with the post-recession reforms of the early to middle 1980s. These policies were responses to a sharp rise in political anxiety articulated in the 1983 report "A Nation at Risk." Following a hiatus in the early 1990s, there was a revival of state-level education investment in class-size reduction beginning about 1992. Policies during this period were strongly influenced by published reports evaluating class-size initiatives adopted during the 1980s. Attention focuses on policy adoptions affecting the early elementary grades (K-3), where the vast majority of state interest has been concentrated. (Contains 16 references.) (DFR)

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ED 464 394

Class Size

An Amendment Reflecting Further Research on State Policies

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Class Size

An Amendment Reflecting Further Research on State Policies

Since writing the "Class Size" overview for the *American Education Annual* (Mitchell and Mitchell, in press),[1] additional progress has been made on obtaining the details of state-level efforts to control class size in the early elementary grades. This report extends the discussion of actions by state legislatures and education agencies to reduce class size by reviewing the contents of specific state statutes and regulations. Data are drawn from primary sources and from e-mail or telephone interviews with state department of education officials. Following the design used in the original "Class Size" paper, class size variability along three major dimensions is highlighted: 1) the specific class size targeted, 2) the extent to which class size policies are limited to specific groups of children, and 3) the extent to which class-size reduction is being implemented through reliance on or driven by funding incentives or regulatory mandates.

The discussion that follows is organized into two sections. First, the three basic dimensions of class size policy are reviewed. In this section, the details of class size calculations are described. The categories defining which student groups are being provided with reduced size classes are discussed. Finally, our earlier work is extended by showing that policy strategies adopted by the states are more varied than previously reported.

The second section of this report compares and contrasts two class size policymaking periods. First, there were several state-level actions associated with the post-recession educational reforms of the early to middle 1980s (Table 1). These policies were responses to a sharp rise in political anxiety poignantly articulated in the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*.

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[1] The *AEA* volume was never published. The referenced paper is available as a technical report from the California Educational Research Cooperative, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Riverside, CA 92521.

Following a hiatus in the early 1990s, there was a revival of state-level education investment in class size reduction beginning about 1992 (Table 2). Class size policies during this latter period were strongly influenced by published reports evaluating class size initiatives adopted during the 1980s, particularly the now famous *Project STAR* experiment conducted in Tennessee between 1985 and 1989. In the discussion that follows, attention is focused on policy adoptions affecting the early elementary grades (K-3), where the vast majority of state interest has been concentrated. Only occasional reference is made to policies affecting upper elementary or secondary grades.

Policy Dimensions

Class size. With few exceptions, the smallest size classes are set for the youngest students. When class size standards are established, they may be mandated to take effect immediately, but are more often phased in over an extended period – typically three to five years. In addition to policies affecting some or all of K-12 education, many states specify early childhood (pre-K) class size limits. Some states have rules regulating community college class size (or teaching load) as well.

In calculating class size it is important to recognize that there are three distinct units of analysis: the classroom, the school, and the district. While school and district pupil-teacher ratio averages are often the subject of state regulation, they should probably not be seen as estimates of class size. These ratios often include special assignment teachers and other staff who lower the student-teacher ratio without affecting the number of children in a typical classroom. It is most appropriate to apply the term "class size" to the number of students assigned to a regular classroom teacher for the duration of an instructional period, but this is not a universal policy definition across the states. The range of class sizes possible for any given the student-teacher ratio is quite substantial, especially when districtwide ratios are used. This variability is even

higher when states include all certified staff (and sometimes even instructional aides) in the formula. In some state policies, variability is somewhat constrained by adding a true class size maximum to a more broadly mandated student-staff ratio.

Secondary school policies typically have two components due to the multiple class period structure of the school day. First, there is a *maximum daily teaching load* limiting the total number of students a teacher has throughout the day. And second, there is a *class period* class size limit. Frequently, where such laws apply, actual class size specifications are contained in collective bargaining agreements.

Target population. Typical class size policies do not cover all public school students equally. The vast majority of state laws target specific grades (generally K-3) for regular education students. Laws may also target specific subjects (e.g., reading, language, mathematics, etc.). But these are not the only targeting strategies. Mandating small classes for various categories of "at-risk" children is common practice. Special education for students who are academically, emotionally, or developmentally differentiated from their peers, particularly "challenged" or "under-performing" students, is common practice. Becoming more common is the practice of designating entire school populations as "at-risk," academically, socioculturally (e.g., from non-English speaking homes), or economically (e.g., from low-income families), and using class size reduction as part of a schoolwide intervention program.

Strategies for compliance. Class size limits may be controlled by: 1) financial incentive programs, 2) direct mandate, 3) foundation formula specifications, or 4) accreditation standards. These different approaches have significantly different effects on the actual class sizes that are produced. Incentive programs are frequently used, but may not provide resources sufficient to assure broad implementation, and vary as to whether compliance with school or classroom level

student-teacher ratios is required to qualify for funding. Direct mandates typically specify absolute maximum class sizes, frequently include waiver provisions to avoid or delay compliance, and may be accompanied by financial penalties for noncompliance. Foundation programs often specify only generic student-teacher ratios that apply across an entire district. When state boards of education set class size standards, they do not always have the force of law.

By their very nature, foundation program revisions are least effective at influencing true class size. Funds from these formulas may as easily go to pay for counselors, social workers, school psychologists, teachers for categorical programs, or special education costs, as to support class size reduction. State money is most likely to be accurately directed at class size reduction if incentive funding programs are adopted, especially if they are generous, applicable to all students, and accompanied by long authorization periods (four years or more). Direct mandates and accreditation standards are not typically supported by state funding, though categorical funding is a rarely employed option. As such both of these latter strategies share the risks that accompany inadequate incentive programs: a lack of uniform implementation of standards, and unequal capacity to locally support or maintain the same quality of educational services.

Class-Size in the 1980s

With the exception of the Florida legislature's authorization of the Primary Education Program in 1979, which included a call for the reduction of class size in the early elementary grades, no state attempted any major effort to fund, mandate, or recommend class-size reduction (or a reduction of the student-teacher ratio) that would result in a level of 20:1 or less until after the national economic recession that ended in 1983. After 1983 the situation changed quickly as states sought ways to become more economically competitive, domestically and internationally, and to respond to a growing sense that educational quality was slipping. Education was seen as a

primary mechanism for improving competitiveness. Class size policy initiatives during the mid-80s included extending early education experiences such as pre-school and kindergarten programs. These extended early childhood programs tended to be accompanied by the introduction of teacher aides and/or restrictions on class size for kindergarten and early elementary grades. Though some states did include upper elementary or secondary level class-size reductions, these were less common and less substantial. Class-size policy adoptions for the 16 states taking substantive action during the decade of the 1980s are summarized in Table 1.

1. Specific class-size targets. No state adopted class size policies mandating fewer than 15 students for regular education classes. As detailed in Table 1, only three states established 15:1 as a target ratio. This target was never extended beyond kindergarten through grade 3. Generally, class sizes were set between 17 and 20, with some states attaining these levels only when averaged across schools or districts. These limits or averages were frequently subject to waiver or a cut-off date after which restrictions were lifted. Ambiguity in class size was compounded by variation in the frequency with which enrollment counts were required to assess compliance. Further, some policies permit the number of children assigned to a classroom to increase when a second teacher or an aide is also assigned to the classroom.

2. Student population and content targets for class size reduction. Despite Florida's early effort to influence class-size to improve educational outcomes for "at-risk" students, class-size reduction policies were more frequently applied to all students of a designated grade level or levels. Rhode Island and Georgia were the only other states to target "at-risk" children during this period. Grades K-3 were the most commonly designated for class-size reduction, with only California reducing class-size for secondary school students.

The basic academic curriculum has been the most common content area target. That is,

Table 1. State Class Size Policies in the 1980s (Detailed for Cap of 20:1 or Fewer)

State	Year	Program	Class Size Target(s)	Extent of Implementation	Content Areas Specified
Arkansas	1983	Mandatory	20 max	K	Not restricted
			23 avg, 25 max	1 to 3	"
			25 avg, 28 max	4 to 6	"
California	1989	Voluntary	20 avg, 22 max	9 to 12	Single academic subject
Florida	1979[a]	Mandatory	Flexible	K to 3	Not restricted
Georgia	1985	Voluntary	17:1 max	K and 1, pupils below 35th NPR	Primary focus on literacy
Hawaii	1987	Mandatory	20 max	K to 2	Not restricted
Indiana	1984,[b] 1987	Voluntary	18:1 max	K and 1	Not restricted
			20:1 max	2 and 3	"
Louisiana	1984,[c] 1989	Mandatory	20:1 systemwide, 26 max	K to 3	Not restricted
Maine	1983	Voluntary	18 :1 max, 15:1 recommended	K to 3	Not restricted
Montana	1987,[d] 1989	Mandatory	20 max*	K to 2	Not restricted
			28 max*	3 to 4	"
			30 max*	5 to 8	"
Nevada	1989	Mandatory	15 max	K to 3	Core academic subjects
New Mexico	1986	Mandatory	20 max	K and 1	Not restricted
			22 max	2	"
			24 max	3	"
			25 max	4 to 6	"
Oklahoma	1985, 1989[e]	Mandatory	20 max*	K to 6	Excluding P.E. and group music classes
Rhode Island	1987[f]	Voluntary	15 max	K to 3, all pupils, supplement for educ. disadv.	Literacy, including numeracy
Tennessee	1975, 1985[g]	Mandatory	25 max	K to 3	Exclud. P.E., art, music or other spec. classes.
			30 max	4 to 6	"
Vermont	1985	Mandatory	20 avg*	K to 3	Not restricted
			25 avg*	4 to 6	"
West Virginia	1983	Mandatory	20 max	K	Excluding group music classes
			25 max	1 to 6	"

Sources: Arkansas State Board Educ. (1996); Calif. Educ. Code. § 52080, et seq. (Lexis 2000); Chiappetta (2000); Cohen (1989); Education Week (1987); Fla. Stat. Ann. § 230.2312 (West 1988); Ind. Code Ann. § 21-1-29-1, et seq. (Burns 1990); Lousiana Dept. Educ. (1997); La. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 17-151, 17-174 (West 2000); Me. Rev. Stat. Ann. tit. 20-A, § 4252 (West 1993); Mon. Admin. R. 10.55.712 (2000); Montana Board Pub. Educ. (1987); Nev. Rev. Stat. § 388.700 (1995); N.M. Stat. Ann. § 22-2-8.2 (Michie 1998); Okla. Stat. Ann. tit. 70, § 18-133.1, 18-133.2 (West 1998); R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-67-1, et seq. (Michie 1996); Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-104, 49-6-3501 (1999); W. Va. Code § 18-5-18a (Lexis 1999).

[a] The impact of the Primary Education Program on class size was negligible (previously falling class sizes started to rise) after 1981 due to rapid population growth.

[b] Indiana's *Project Prime Time*, following a 1981-1983 pilot study, had increased funding levels in 1987 resulting in nearly 100% implementation - compelling incentives.

[c] A class size limit of 20 for K-3 was established in 1984, contingent upon funding, to go into effect in 1986. Funding was never appropriated.

[d] Originally, the class sizes were 24 for K, 26 for 1 to 2, 28 for 3 to 4, and 30 for 5 to 8. Smaller classes required for combination grade classrooms, established in 1987, remain 20 for K to 3, 24 for 4 to 6, and 26, for 7 to 8, with classes spanning "cross grade level boundaries" constrained to the limit applying to the lowest grade.

[e] HB 1017 (1st Ext. Sess., 42nd Leg.) lowered grades 4-6 target from 25 to 20, K target from 22 to 20, and restored target of 20 for 1-3 (stalled at 24 during 1st Reg. Sess.).

[f] Rhode Island's grant program was funded only through 1989.

[g] Year Tennessee's *Project STAR* was funded, following a very small pilot study; small classes intended to range from 13 to 17 students with one teacher (15:1 avg).

* Number may be higher with a classroom aide.

mathematics and reading/language arts get the most attention, with the hope of improving performance on standardized tests in these subject areas. Occasionally, only literacy development was targeted, while at other times the entire daily program was to take place in a reduced size class (most common for the self-contained elementary school classroom). Differentiated targets most commonly involve exempting physical education and music classes from class size requirements. Secondary level laboratory and vocational education classes often have their own class size limits for reasons having to do with equipment costs and laboratory or shop safety.

3. Incentives and/or mandates for policy implementation. States varied dramatically in the extent to which they provided financial incentives to reduce class size rather than regulatory mandates for class size changes. Penalties for failure to comply with mandates range from the full cost of a classroom teacher to the ADA for a single student. Some policy actions are strictly recommendations that carry neither financial incentives nor mandates, though a few foundation funding programs are generous enough to make compliance a realistic possibility.

Class-Size in the 1990s

After a hiatus during the late 1980s and early 1990s, accompanied by a relatively sharp economic decline and recession, state-level class size reduction policies became popular again starting in 1992. The nation was continuing to lament the quality of education and urging greater investment in education. As the issue of class size re-emerged, it was buttressed by educational research findings claiming to document the impact of class size reduction on student achievement. Additionally, evidence was presented to support the view that there are special added achievement benefits for poor and "underrepresented minority" students. With the new research findings and new money came some shifts in the content of state class size policy

Table 2. State Class Size Policies in the 1990s (Detailed for Cap of 20:1 or Fewer)

State	Year	Program	Class Size Target(s)	Extent of Implementation	Content Areas Specified
Alabama	1997	Mandatory	18 max*	K to 3	Not restricted
Arkansas	1983, 1996	Mandatory	20 max* 23 avg, 25 max	K 1 to 3	Not restricted "
California	1996 1989, 1998	Voluntary	20 max 20 avg, 22 max	K to 3 9	Mathematics & Reading Two subjects, one English
Connecticut	1998	Voluntary	18 max	K to 3; low income districts	Reading
Florida	1995 1998	Mandatory	20 max 15 max	K to 3 K to 3, critically low score schools	Not restricted "
Georgia	1985, 1999	Mandatory	18.2 avg, 21 max* 21.5 avg, 25 max*	K, adjust for no. of low perf. studs. 1 to 3, adj. for no. of low perf. studs.	Excluding P.E. and group music "
Hawaii	1987[a]	Mandatory	21 max	K to 2	Not restricted
Idaho	1997	Voluntary (max is accredi- tation standard)	20 goal, 23 max 20 goal, 26 max 26 goal, 28 max	K to 1 2 to 3 4 to 6	Not restricted " "
Indiana	1984, 1988 1999[b]	Voluntary	18:1 max 20:1 max 15:1 up to 18:1	K and 1 2 and 3 K-3, sliding scale ("at-risk" index)	Not restricted " "
Iowa	1999	Voluntary	17:1	K to 3, low income districts	Basic skills
Louisiana	1984, 1989	Mandatory	20:1 systemwide, 26 max 33 max	K to 3 4 to 12	Not restricted "
Maine	1983	Voluntary	18 :1 max, 15:1	K to 3	Not restricted
Maryland	1999	Voluntary	20:1 max	1 and 2	Reading
Michigan	1997	Voluntary	17 avg, 19 max	K to 3, high % low income districts	Not restricted
Montana	1987, 1989	Mandatory	20 max*	K to 2	Not restricted
Nevada	1989	Mandatory	15 max	K to 3	Core academic subjects
New Mexico	1986, 1994	Mandatory	15 max* 20 max* 22 avg 24 avg	K 1 2 and 3 4 to 6	Not restricted " " "
New York	1997	Voluntary	20 avg	K to 3	Not restricted
Oklahoma	1985, 1989	Mandatory	20 max*	K to 6	Not restricted
Rhode Island	1987,[c] 1996	Voluntary	15 max	K to 3	Literacy, including numeracy
South Carolina	1977,[d] 1998	Voluntary	15:1 max	1 to 3, priority to "impaired" districts	Not restricted
South Dakota	1993	Voluntary	15 max	K to 3, intended to serve "at-risk" youth	Not restricted

Table 2. State Class Size Policies in the 1990s (*continued*)

Tennessee	1984, 1992[e]	Mandatory	20 avg, 25 max 25 avg, 30 max	K to 3 4 to 6	Exclud. P.E., art, music or other spec. classes "
Texas	1984, 1995[f]	Mandatory	20:1 Districtwide, 22 max	K to 4	Not restricted
Utah	1992	Mandatory	18:1 max	K to 2 K to 8	Reading emphasized "
Vermont	1985, 1998	Mandatory	20 avg* 25 avg*	K to 3 4 to 6	Not restricted "
Virginia	1995	Voluntary	15:1 up to 20:1	K-3, sliding scale (low income stud. pop.)	Not restricted
West Virginia	1983	Mandatory	20 max 25 max	K 1 to 6	Excluding group music classes "
Wisconsin	1995	Voluntary (*SAGE*)	15:1 max	K to 3, districts >30% low inc. students	Not restricted
Wyoming	1997	Mandatory	20:1 Districtwide	K to 3	Not restricted

Sources: See Table 1; Cal. Educ. Code § 52122 (Lexis 2000); Conn. Gen. Stat. Ann. § 10-265f (West 1999); Del. Code Ann. tit. 14, § 1705A (1998); Education Commission of the States (1999); Education Week (1997); Ga. Comp. R. & Regs. r. 160-5-1.08 (1999); Idaho Admin. Code § 08.02.02.100 (2000); Ill. Stat. Ann. ch. 105, § 5/2-3.51 (West 1998); Ind. Code Ann. § 21-1-30-1, et seq. (2000); Iowa Code Ann. § 256D.1 (1999); Ky. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 157.360 (Michie 1996); Lewit and Baker (1997); Md. Com. I Law Code Ann. § 5-212 (1999); McManis (1997); Mich. Comp. Laws § 388.1631c (2000); Mo. Ann. Stat. § 160.550.1 (West 2000); Neb. Admin. R. & Regs. 92-10-004.03A4 (1996); N.H. Code Admin. R. [Educ.] 306.16 (2000); N.Y. Educ. Law § 3602.37 (1997); N.C. Gen. Stat. § 115C-301 (Michie 1997); Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (1996); Robelen (1998); S.C. Code Ann. § 59-20-40, 59-63-65 (1998); S.D. Codified Laws Ann. § 13-14-8.1 (Lexis 1999); Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-3-361 (1999); Texas Education Agency (1999); Texas Educ. Code § 25.111, 25.112 (2000); Utah Code Ann. § 53A-17a-124.5 (2000); Va. Code Ann. tit. 22, § 1-199.1 (Michie 1997); 1995 Wis. Legis. Serv. Act 27 § 3994m (West); Wis. Stat. Ann. § 388.1631c (West 1999); Wyo. Stat. § 21-9-1(

Note: The following states have some class, school, or district level policies limiting class size or student-teacher ratio to 25 or less (number and grades indicated in parentheses) – Delaware (22, K-3), Kentucky (24, K-3), Maine (25, K-8), Massachusetts (25, K), Mississippi (22, K), Missouri (25, K-2), Nebraska (25, K-12), New Hampshire (25, K-2), New Jersey (25, K), North Carolina (23, K-2), North Dakota (25, K-3), Ohio (25, K-12), Virginia (25, K; 24, 1), and Washington (23, K-12). Connecticut, California, Michigan, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin permit class sizes to be collectively bargained.

[a] Hawaii raised their class size limit to 21 in response to inadequate revenues from weakening tourism in 1997.

[b] This change not effective until January 1, 2001.

[c] Rhode Island's grant program was not renewed until 1996. No other class size provisions in state laws or codes.

[d] This first measure set the student-teacher ratio at 21:1, with a class size maximum of 28, targeting basic skills in mathematics and reading.

[e] Class size averages added to statutes in 1992; Tennessee Acts of 1992 also established a K-3 at-risk class size program to be developed by the state department of education, and to be approved by the state board of education.

[f] Districtwide class size ratio added to statutes in 1995.

* Number may be higher with a classroom aide.

initiatives. The total class size policy picture for the 1990s is summarized in Table 2. Twenty-nine states adopted substantially new state-level class size policies.

1. Specific class-size targets. As in the 1980s policy actions, no state adopted a class size below 15 students per teacher. However, seven additional states did establish a 15:1 ratio, though some of these new policy targets were only for a single grade or a restricted, "at-risk" population. Generally, class sizes continued to be set between 17 and 20, with school or district averaging a common policy feature. With the passage of a federal initiative (P.L. 105-277) in the latter part of 1998, targeting reading at a level of 18:1, it does not appear likely that many states will seek to reduce class-size significantly below that level.

2. Student population targets for class size reduction. Class-size reduction for grade K-3 became the overwhelming favorite age-grade target, though some efforts to reduce the teaching load for high school English teachers (and other upper elementary and secondary teachers) occurred during the 1990s. More states adopted policies that differentiated among students within the designated grades than during the previous decade. Now, programs are much more frequently targeted for "at-risk" populations.

Focusing policy initiatives on specific curriculum targets became more common in the 1990s. Improving reading and mathematics performance are the highest priorities. Whole class, all day class size reduction was less commonly targeted, while the "core academic subjects" remained the central focus in K-3 class size reduction.

3. Incentives and/or mandates for policy implementation. Substantial funding to support state policy initiatives became more common in the 1990s. The funding mechanisms included both incentive programs and foundation formula adjustments. In Texas, a debt relief measure was passed to help make up for the cost of a 1980s mandate. Nonetheless, it should be

noted that in at least one state, increased foundation funds intended to facilitate regular education class size reduction were absorbed by the costs of hiring additional counselors and the increasing costs of special education (Haley 2000).

Conclusion

Prior to the 1970s, class size was almost exclusively a local school district matter. With rare exception, it was not until the 1980s that class size policies included the goal of significantly reducing the student-teacher ratio in the classroom. State policies came in two distinct waves – one in the 1980s and a second in the 1990s. The two waves were initiated during periods of economic recovery, the first beginning in 1983, and separated from the second by a nearly three-year period of economic recession that ended in 1992.

Class size policy has clear and predictable qualities despite state to state variations. Classes are set to the smallest sizes for the youngest children, rarely greater than 25, and never less than 15 students per teacher for kindergarten, and often the same levels for the early elementary grades (1 to 3) as well. Reading is of tantamount importance, but a large portion of the "academic core" (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) also receives attention. The principle of more individualized attention to student needs is the most common rationale for class size reduction policies. Where concern for meeting the needs of "at-risk" children is high, class size policies are focused on identified sub-populations. All this increased attention to individual students has a high price tag. Class size policies are very expensive and require enormous financial support if they are to be implemented fully and widely. There is constant competition among educational programs for limited funds. As a result, highly specific language – allowing less local discretion – has become more common in policies aimed at reducing class size. State-level policymaking has become more uniform and more prescriptive.

Class size reduction is now sufficiently popular that it secures direct support through federal funding. Smaller classes to support improved student achievement is now national policy.

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